

**Mária Schmidt**

## ***Europe's Fraternal War***

### **Abstract**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the arms race was already underway, and conflicts were gradually reduced to either-or questions. Either the German Empire would be successful in tipping the European balance of power and thus challenging British dominance, or the Triple Entente would succeed in pushing back German expansionist efforts. It was only a matter of time as to who would brave the first move.

*Keywords:* World War I, Central Powers, Entente Powers, Versailles Peace Conference, Treaties of Paris.

*"The goal of the historian is understanding."*

Marc Bloch

In 1871, the order based on the balance of power among the European powers was jeopardized by the establishment of the German Empire, an event that British Prime Minister Disraeli<sup>1</sup> called more important than the French Revolution of 1789. The order that ceased to exist in this way had ensured that the British oversee and lead Europe after their victory at Waterloo. The easy Prussian victory over the French, followed by the declaration of the German Empire at Versailles, however, created a new power center in the heart of Europe that proved to be at once too large and too small. It was too large not to pose a challenge to the powers that had an interest in maintaining the status quo and their emerging challengers alike. Similarly, it was too large not to fill its neighbors with fear. Nevertheless, it was too small to be able to defeat all the forces at once that rejected German hegemony.

The economic advantage enjoyed by the British global empire, the leading power in world trade and industrial production, over the German Empire and the United States was shrinking at an alarming rate around 1900. The latter two countries both demonstrated a more dynamic growth, and, what is more, they were significantly ahead of the British in the new branches of industry.

Analyzing the challenge that the establishment of the new German Empire presented to the world's leading great power of the time, Eyre Crowe, a high-ranking official of the Foreign Office, came to the following conclusion in 1907: „*It does not matter what policy it chooses. (...) Germany on its own, independent of its intentions, presents an objective threat for Great Britain. Therefore, its existence is incompatible with the existence of the British Empire.*”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Disraeli (1804–1881), British Prime Minister in 1868 and then from 1874 to 1880.

<sup>2</sup> Henry KISSINGER: *On China*. Penguin, New York, 2011. 518–519.

To put it simply, and in the words of one-time British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir Edward Grey, the Anglo-German clash stemmed from the sheer existence of German unity and was thus inevitable.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the crisis that led to the First World War was caused by the potential of a united Germany rather than by German actions. This means that the year 1871 decided that of 1914. This still holds true even though there were general clashes between the great powers of Europe for more than four decades between those two years. The Cold War era ensured a similarly long period of peace. Both of these periods saw local wars, but they successfully avoided the global test.<sup>4</sup> Long-term peace in both cases brought about enormous economic, cultural, technological and scientific development.

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the British global empire entered into a series of diplomatic treaties that aimed to isolate and contain Germany.<sup>5</sup> To that end, it conciliated all previous conflicts with all its previous rivals considered to be more powerful than the German Empire, thus making peace with Russia and France, so that it could line up for battle an alliance of the powerful against the German Empire. In 1904, the British global empire made peace with its ancient rival France, and three years later it joined forces with the Russians, who had cultivated an amicable alliance with the Germans up to that point.<sup>6</sup> The British ultimately opted for the French and the Russians instead of an alliance with Germany because of the latter's presumed weakness.<sup>7</sup>

By that time, the goal of preventing a Russo-German alliance at all costs overrode 19<sup>th</sup>-century reflexes that rested on the presumption that British and Russian interests clashed in so many parts of the world that their reconciliation was difficult to imagine. The recognition that a Russo-German alliance would paralyze France and would increase the ability of the Russians to maneuver in Asia and the Far East at the same time proved more powerful than global rivalry. Both possibilities would mark the end of British hegemony in Europe and the world. The more Germany was being boxed in, the more upset the German Empire became and the more it broke with the traditions of Bismarck, thus making it impossible to form alliances and to divide rivals. Germany began to be frightened of the future, especially after the French

---

<sup>3</sup> Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933), British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs between 1905 and 1916.

<sup>4</sup> As Lord Salisbury put it, the goal at the time was to expand further at the expense of the „dying nations“, namely the Ottoman Empire, China and Persia. MULLIGAN, William: *The Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> In parallel, by 1909, war plans made by the British Royal Navy against Germany were completed.

<sup>6</sup> In 1907, Russia relinquished its interests in Afghanistan, and Persia was divided into Russian, neutral and British zones.

<sup>7</sup> Niall FERGUSON: *The Kaiser's European Union: What if Britain had 'stood aside' in August 1914?* IN: Niall FERGUSON (ed.): *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. Pan Books, London – Oxford, 2003.

stimulated the strengthening of the Russian military potential with huge sums. This fear had spread among all the European great powers by 1910. They started to feel more insecure about their hard-won status. The arms race was underway, and conflicts were gradually reduced to either-or questions. Either the German Empire would be successful in tipping the European balance of power and thus challenging British dominance or the Triple Entente would succeed in pushing back German expansionist efforts. It was only a matter of time as to who would brave the first move.

When on June 28, 1914 a Bosnian Serb terrorist supported by the Russian secret service assassinated heir presumptive of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy Archduke Franz Ferdinand, this „*casus belli*” between the Monarchy and Serbia, that is, a local conflict in the Balkans, grew into Europe’s fraternal war. Austria could not leave the provocation unanswered that the assassination represented. Germany supported this whole-heartedly because the weakening of the great power status of its ally would have significantly weakened its own status as well. Since its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Russia was continually forced to step back. With a show of strength in the Balkans, it hoped to regain its prestige. France was in need of its most important ally, Russia, because it would have felt completely vulnerable without it. Britain considered the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe its most important goal. When Russia began to mobilize, there was no stopping it. This war was first and foremost a European civil war that spanned four years and influenced the future of our continent and thereby that of the whole world in a fundamental way.

During the First World War, also called the „*Great War*”, the warring parties did not clarify their war objectives and thus contributed to the prolongation of military conflicts as well as to the enormous human and economic losses. The modern warfare that had developed by that time was more advantageous to defense than to offense; machine guns in defensive positions, war gases, trenches and barbed wire created impenetrable obstacles and forced the warring parties into an endless stationary war. The propaganda issued by the Triple Entente and the United States, which had joined the alliance, identified the conflict as a clash between democracy and tyranny despite the fact that both the German Empire and its ally, the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, were constitutional systems that guaranteed liberal rights of freedom. Moreover, the Germany of Bismarck with its groundbreaking socially-minded measures became the forerunner of future social market economies. The war propaganda of the Entente Powers decried „*Prussian militarism*” as a threat to peace and condemned Austria-Hungary’s „*indignant*” treatment of its nationalities. Yet it is a fact that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the countries that would form the Central Powers initiated far fewer armed conflicts than the future Entente Powers, of which the British alone fought over

100 wars to maintain and expand their colonial rule. Similarly, it is also a fact that the multinational Habsburg Monarchy did not make it impossible for nations and nationalities to develop or for national cultures to be cultivated. Russia, one of the Entente Powers, however, was only taking the first steps in its shift to a constitutional state structure. And Belgium had gained a rather dubious reputation for its slaughter of ten million Congolese. During the Boer War, the British locked their opponents in concentration camps after they defeated them with automatic weapons.

Preserving Belgian independence, which supposedly was a matter of honor for later British Prime Minister Lloyd George<sup>8</sup> and which has been referred to very often since then, was clearly an excuse for the British. On August 3, one day before the British declaration of war, Foreign Secretary Grey announced in the House of Commons that maintaining the country's leading position in Europe was at stake, which would undoubtedly end if the German Empire were to achieve a dominant role on the continent. Two years later, he himself was worried about what Britain would do if the Germans grew too weak and there were no one to keep the Russians in line. The United States faced the same dilemma after the Second World War.

A standoff between the Central Powers and the Entente Powers developed in the clash between 1914 and 1917. Then both parties decided it was not too great a price to list among their war objectives the loosening of the social structure of their rivals. The Central Powers caused social unrest and national conflicts to flare up, while the member countries of the Western alliance used the question of nationhood to break up their enemies. In 1917, the Tsar fell, and then the group of Bolshevik leaders that had made it home with the support of the Germans led a successful coup d'état in Russia and ended Russian participation in the war. That group included Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, that is, Lenin, who, in Churchill's words, was transported in a sealed truck like a plague bacillus from Switzerland to Russia. The Germans tested the nerves of the British by supporting Irish independence and those of the Americans by inciting the Mexicans against them. In the months following the abdication of the Tsar, the United States entered the war in alliance with the Entente Powers and demanded unconditional surrender from its enemies. This ended the possibility for a peace of compromise between the European opponents in the war. After its victory over the Russians, it was no use for the German Empire to redeploy its troops to the west because it no longer had a chance to win against American military power, both enormous and fresh.

The fraternal war demanded huge sacrifices. Over 6% of Europe's population either died or were seriously disabled. There were twenty million

---

<sup>8</sup> David Lloyd George (1863–1945), British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Minister of Munitions and Home Secretary between 1914 and 1916, and then Prime Minister from 1916 to 1922.

disabled and over eight million dead on the battlefields. The population weakened as a result of the war was further destroyed by the Spanish influenza, which claimed nearly twenty million victims. The losses suffered by historical Hungary were horrific. There were almost 700,000 who died a heroic death, and the same number of people were injured and captured. Of these figures, the loss of soldiers whose mother tongue was Hungarian reached 350,000. This was almost twice as many as Hungarian battlefield losses during the Second World War.

The Versailles Peace Conference left the continent without peace. The „winning” powers, that is, France, Britain and Italy, were fatally weakened in this war over the years, and they expected the United States, which ensured victory and dictated the conditions for peace, to ensure the new European order. Encouraged by US President Wilson<sup>9</sup>, they disregarded the exigencies of „Realpolitik” and relied instead on the principle of collective security and the League of Nations to be established to guarantee the new order created by them. They spoke of a „just peace”, but they excluded the defeated and even Russia from the negotiations. They humiliated them and only spoke to them when they informed them of their conditions. French Premier Clemenceau<sup>10</sup>, British Prime Minister Lloyd George and Italian Prime Minister Orlando<sup>11</sup> forced a treaty on the continent, for the maintenance of which they had neither power nor capacity. They failed to recognize that without the United States they could not enforce the peace treaties and reparations obligations that they had forced on Europe. The problem was aggravated by the fact that the United States did not ratify the treaties of Versailles and was unwilling to join the League of Nations that Wilson called for. The Washington Agreement (1921–1922) clearly laid down the end of the domination of the British global empire over seas by prescribing that its fleet may not be larger than that of the United States.

The Treaties of Paris unilaterally placed responsibility for the outbreak of the war on the Central Powers to justify both the inability of the Entente Powers to strike a peace with compromise and the humiliating and serious peace conditions that they set for the defeated. They sliced up the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy and Hungary within it into their constituent parts,<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States between March 4, 1913 and March 4, 1921.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929), Interior Minister as of 1914 and Prime Minister between 1917 and 1920.

<sup>11</sup> Vittorio Orlando (1860–1952), Italian Prime Minister between 1917 and 1919.

<sup>12</sup> „The Habsburg Monarchy existed so that it could be the border region for western society against another universal state, into which the Ottomans blended the Balkan Peninsula, which represented the heart of Orthodox Christianity ... [It] began to decline as soon as Ottoman pressure began to weaken ... and finally fell to pieces in the same great war – in the world war between 1914 and 1918 – in which the Ottoman Empire fell to pieces as well.” Arnold J. TOYNBEE: *Válogatott tanulmányok* [Selected Papers]. Gondolat, Budapest, 1971. 58.

even though it was Hungarian Prime Minister István Tisza who had resisted the war hysteria that had taken over Europe the longest. With the abdication of the Kaiser, Germany fell into a crisis of legitimacy, although as a result of the peace conditions it found itself in a geopolitically more advantageous position than it did before the Great War. The tiny states established to replace Austria-Hungary were no longer able to resist German demands, while the newly strengthening Germany, not unlike the „winners”, played one off against the other. In the east, the new Poland bordered the Germans, the existence of which bothered Russia at least as much as it did them and in the new division of which they would agree quite soon.

Wilson, Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Orlando, therefore, forced a treaty on Europe and on Eastern Europe within that which they already knew was unjust and therefore not lasting. Their purpose, however, here as well as in the Middle East was to ensure with the capricious drawing of the borders that the people living in the areas affected would see in each other their most hated enemies and not be able to unite through mutual interests and present an opposing force.<sup>13</sup> Their irresponsibility and cynicism could perhaps best be illustrated by a statement issued by Lloyd George with regard to the Treaty of Trianon: „*There will never be peace in Central Europe if it turns out after the fact that Hungary's claims are justified and that whole Hungarian communities were handed over to Czechoslovakia and Romania like a herd of cattle only because the conference (!) rejected a discussion of the Hungarian case.*” He was right; peace would be long in coming.

As a result of the Russian and German collapse, Europe fell into a hopeless situation also from an economic point of view. The winning powers, which had been bolstered by the Treaties of Paris, began falling apart after a decade in a process which would be completed a generation later.<sup>14</sup> All of this undermined the leading position that Europe had played in the world for centuries, launched the American century, and made a new clash, that is, the Second World War inevitable.

---

<sup>13</sup> In 1922, the French and the British divided the Near East between themselves. France took Syria and Lebanon, while the British obtained Palestine, the Transjordan region and Iraq. They created states on their own territories, appointed their leaders and drew the borders between them. They destroyed local political structures and attempted to shape them in their own image. David FROMKIN: *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, Holt, New York, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Norman STONE: *World War One. A Short History*. Penguin, New York, 2008. 186.